Mary Augusta's Price

by

Sophie Swett

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MARY AUGUSTA AT HOME

MARY AUGUSTA'S PRICE

CHAPTER I

MARY AUGUSTA AT HOME

MARY AUGUSTA was tall for her fifteen years, and she had a high forehead, and a long, peaked chin. Her sisters, Eldora and Miranda, had disputations as to whether it was the high forehead or the peaked chin that made her look so "sober." But Mary Augusta knew that it was neither; it was because she wasn't "smart."

Miranda, who was nineteen, gave music lessons and was the village librarian; and Eldora, who was only seventeen, had taught school for more than a year. Elnathan, the boy of the family, Mary Augusta's twin, was the best student in the high school, and the minister was already talking about helping him to make his way through college.

When the neighbors congratulated Mrs. Wing upon the abilities and talents of her fatherless brood, they were apt to add, "What is Mary Augusta going to do?" And Mrs. Wing would heave a long sigh and say despairingly that Mary Augusta didn't want to do anything but to clean out under the stove.

Mrs. Wing herself scrubbed tirelessly and scorned housework for her daughters. She had cherished a hope that Mary Augusta would be literary and write poetry for the papers, as Eunice

Phillips did—under the *nom de plume* of Violet Walsingham. She said she thought if she had a daughter who was literary she could die happy; and the others being so capable had given Mary Augusta such a chance that it seemed as if she ought to be the one.

One afternoon when her mother had said all that to Miss Roxally Tapley, Mary Augusta went and sat on a stump, away out by the pasture bars, and knew that she wasn't literary and never could be, and felt that life was dark.

She did fairly well at school, but that was because Elnathan helped her and kept her from putting "the cart before the horse" in her Latin translations—that was what Elnathan said she did; Mary Augusta thought that the ancient Latin worthies had that way themselves.

He drew so many figures on the barn door in trying to get geometry into her head that the tin peddler—who was editor of the "rebus corner" in the county paper—thought he had invented a puzzle and offered him a brand-new coffee pot to go shares in it. Elnathan seeing Mary Augusta on the stump, which he knew was her stool of misery, offered her consolation.

"Never mind! When you are an old maid you shall live with me and I will take care of you, and you shall do nothing but scrub up and make preserves."

Mary Augusta smiled gratefully; Elnathan meant to be kind; but there was a little bitterness in the smile; he intended her to be like Curlylocks in Mother Goose's rhymes, who was to

Sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam,
And feed upon strawberries, sugar, and cream.

With all the others, Elnathan thought that she would never be good for anything. Some one must always take care of her.

"Garafelia Bumpus is going to the city to take painting lessons," pursued Elnathan. "They think she will be able to paint portraits. She can draw people now, so you know in a minute who they are; she drew old Mr. Maddocks asleep in church so you could almost hear him snore. Lucky for the Bumpuses to have one smart one in the family!"

And Elnathan still meant only to be kind; he thought he was cheering Mary Augusta with light gossip. A boy may astonish the minister with his Latin verses, and go over the *pons asinorum* with colors flying, and possess a kind heart withal, and yet be as tactless as if he had no brains whatever.

Thus the iron entered still more deeply into Mary Augusta's soul, and for what came afterward—for Mary Augusta's weakness in the moment of temptation—Elnathan and his consolation had their share of innocent responsibility. Not even Elnathan, who was her twin brother, and boasted that it was easy for a fellow like him to see through a girl—not even Elnathan knew that Mary Augusta was ambitious.

"You can have all my quinces to make your jelly, if you want to send some to the fair," said Elnathan, slowly, at length. This was another effort at consolation, Mary Augusta's look having shown him that the first was a failure.

Through the gloom of Mary Augusta's face struggled a faint gleam of brightness. Mrs. Tackaberry, the most notable housewife in Joppa, had praised the jelly that she made last year, and wondered that she had not sent some of it to the county fair. In a confidential moment Mary Augusta had whispered to Elnathan, breathlessly, that some time she meant to send some.

That was last fall, and Elnathan had never thought of it since. Glancing across the pasture he had caught sight of his yellowing quinces above the garden wall and had been reminded of Mary Augusta's intention just in time.

But Mary Augusta's face darkened again; one might make quince jelly, amber, translucent, ambrosial, fit to send to the county fair, and yet have to be taken care of. It would not make one like those brilliant girls who taught school and gave music lessons and could learn to paint portraits, and take care of themselves, and be an honor and help to their families. The jelly might even win a prize, but that would not prevent her mother from comparing her, with bitter disparagement, to Eunice Phillips, who wrote poetry for the *Clarion.*

MARY AUGUSTA'S FACULTY

CHAPTER II

MARY AUGUSTA'S FACULTY

"MARY AUGUSTA!" Her mother's voice came shrill across the pasture. "Miss Roxally wants to see you."

Mary Augusta arose reluctantly. Miss Roxally always carried a plump little pin-cushion, with a fine assortment of pins and needles dangling at her side; she had been a dressmaker and clung with pride to this badge of her calling. She also carried a collection of metaphorical pins and needles, with which she dealt merciless stabs; she described herself as being one that always spoke her mind.

From childhood Mary Augusta had

harbored a vague sense that the literal pins had something to do with the metaphorical stabs, and she felt a real shrinking of the flesh from Miss Roxally. Her mother waylaid her before she reached the sitting-room.

"It seems considerable like being a hired girl, but you can do as you're a mind to," she whispered.

Miss Roxally smiled upon her with the factitious pleasantness born of very even rows of false teeth, and Mary Augusta smiled wanly in return, trying to conceal the apprehensive quiver of her peaked chin which Miss Roxally's presence always caused.

"I've just been telling your mother that there wa'n't another girl in Joppa that was so close-mouthed that I could trust 'em to help me finish my rug," said

Miss Roxally. "Maybe it isn't always a good sign," she added, promptly. "My grandmother Phillips used to say where there was so much silence there was something brewing. But if you want a secret kept, thinks I, Mary Augusta Wing is the girl—to say nothing of your having some faculty that way, for this here sitting-room rug of yours is real pretty for a girl of your age to hook; I've got one on my back kitchen that ain't a mite better-looking!"

"Mary Augusta hooked that rug when she wa'n't but twelve. She's some like her Grandma Wing, that wa'n't never happy without she had a rag carpet on the frame," said Mrs. Wing, with a touch of scorn.

"For them that couldn't never get forehanded enough to get a boughten carpet, even for their parlor, rag carpets were better'n nothing,'' said Miss Roxally, with her accustomed candor.

And Mrs. Wing was moved to reply, with some spirit, that for her part she was glad her girls were intellectual—all but Mary Augusta.

Miss Roxally moved her creaking rocking-chair deliberately around until Mrs. Wing was in retirement behind its high back.

''I'll give you two dollars a week to come and help me so's't I can finish my rug in time for the fair, Mary Augusta,'' she said. ''We'll do the housework together; 'tisn't any great, any way, and then there'll be plenty of time for two of us to get the rug done. I could finish it myself if I didn't happen to get a crick in my neck or a numb spell, but being subject to them I didn't dare to risk it. And I didn't want to spoil it by hurrying. I've earnt my money hard, but good honest labor pays just as well, sometimes, as if 'twas intellectual,—like school-keeping and giving music-lessons,—and I've got now where I can afford to hire help."

Even from her ignominious retirement behind the chair, Mrs. Wing forced herself to say, with an effect of heartiness, that she knew Miss Roxally had a beautiful house with everything beautiful in it, to say nothing of money in the bank. Since Mary August was not intellectual she might as well do what she could.

"I've got proper pride enough to keep Lucinda Tackaberry from beating me at rug-making," said Miss Roxally, firmly; and she moved her chair halfway around again in token of propitiation. Mary Augusta said she would go.

"I want you to understand, Mary Augusta," said Miss Roxally, with solemn emphasis, "that there isn't to be a word said about that rug to anybody, either what the pattern is or where it came from. While I never was one to speak ill of my neighbors, I know Lucinda Tackaberry, root and branch, and underhandedness comes natural to some."

Mary Augusta promised readily, even a little absent-mindedly, it seemed so easy a promise to keep, that she would guard faithfully all secrets connected with the rug.

"Land sakes! you needn't be a mite afraid," said Mrs. Wing. "It isn't in Mary Augusta to talk."

Mary Augusta went in the stage over to Miss Roxally's house at the Corner, early the next morning. Mrs. Wing had suggested that as it was Saturday Mary Augusta might better wait until Monday, but Miss Roxally said she couldn't enjoy her gospel privileges, Sunday, if she had to feel that the rug was hanging fire, so to speak.

Elnathan clung to the back of the stage, after it had started, and murmured hoarsely that one of these days she shouldn't make rugs for anybody but herself and him. Entirely indifferent, himself, to Miss Roxally's pin-pricks, Elnathan was vaguely aware of Mary Augusta's sensitiveness to them, and of a certain "pluck" that she was displaying in this venture.

Miranda played a rattling march, in

an interval of dusting the parlor, and waved her duster out of the window by way of a cheerful speeding; but she said, with a sigh, to Eldora, that she had known there was nothing to be expected of Mary Augusta as long ago as when she always wanted to make sorrel tea instead of dressing dolls.

When Miss Roxally had retired from business five years before, she had forsaken the rural simplicity of North Joppa for the comparative elegance of the Corner, and had bought a house with a bay window, and with ornamental slates on its roof, and a front yard with star- and heart-shaped flower beds. She had given herself up to the housewifely delights for which in the days of her cramped little shop and incessant cutting and fitting she had always longed.

Floriculture and fancy work were her chief joys, and at first the rivalry of Mrs. Lucinda Tackaberry, who lived a little farther out of town on the same road, was only a pleasant stimulus. Even after Mrs. Tackaberry had a second bay window added to her house and the roof painted red, and a marble "image" placed in her front yard, Miss Roxally could "feel to fellowship her," as she generously remarked, and there was no diminution of neighborly intimacy.

But when Mrs. Tackaberry's embroidered sofa pillow and silk lamp shade both won prizes at the county fair, while Miss Roxally's remained unnoticed, the latter lady expressed herself freely as being obliged, in decent self-respect, to remember that Mrs. Tackaberry's own niece's husband was on the committee of awards, and although wild horses wouldn't draw such a remark from her, there were those who had gone so far as to say that two and two made four.

From that time dated not only Miss Roxally's firm determination to win that particular prize at the fair for which Mrs. Tackaberry should strive, but also a dignified coldness on both sides and an end of all friendly intercourse.

A CHEERY TEMPTRESS

CHAPTER III

A CHEERY TEMPTRESS

AS Mary Augusta went into church the morning after her arrival, Mrs. Tackaberry greeted her in friendly fashion, even sharing with her the old-fashioned "posy" of southernwood and sweet peas which she carried. Her sweet peas bloomed earlier and later than other folks's, she whispered proudly. Mary Augusta was walking with Martha Perry, but Miss Roxally, who was just in front of them, overheard and sniffed contemptuously.

Between the first hymn and the prayer, Miss Roxally leaned over and whispered impressively to Mary Augusta:

"I'd just as lief you wouldn't have anything at all to say to Mrs. Tackaberry while you're stopping with me." And she wisked the posy off Mary Augusta's lap with her fan. She did it as if by accident, but when Mary Augusta stooped to pick it up she found that Miss Roxally's heavy foot was set upon it.

When they went out of church, Miss Roxally was surrounded by friends, and Mary Augusta suddenly found Mrs. Tackaberry's pleasant face smiling down upon her again.

"I don't know as I've seen you since you were a little mite of a girl," she said. "But I should have known you anywhere, you favor your father so much."

There was cheery friendliness in the

creases of Mrs. Tackaberry's double chin, a helpful kindness in the firm pressure of her fat hand; or so it seemed to Mary Augusta when Mrs. Tackaberry said:

"We'll walk right along together. Deacon Greer has carried Miss Tapley off in his carriage; I expect she knew I would look out for you."

Mary Augusta shrank back and murmured something about Martha Perry. But Martha Perry had gone along with a knot of girls; the girls were walking slowly, evidently engaged in an interesting discussion. Mary Augusta thought that she and her companion would soon overtake them and then she could make an excuse to leave her for them.

So Mary Augusta walked on with the firm clasp upon her arm and the creases in Mrs. Tackaberrys' double chin becoming more and more genially deep.

"Ever since I called on your mother last fall and tasted your quince jelly I've wanted to get acquainted with you. I'm always hearing how smart your mother's girls are."

"I'm the one that isn't smart," said Mary Augusta, in candid humility.

"You not smart? the one that made that jelly and the one that Miss Roxally Tapley chose to help her?" A playful little tap of her fan emphasized the flattery of Mrs. Tackaberry's remonstrance. "I tell you housekeeping accomplishments are thought a great deal of now-a-days, and they pay, which is more than can be said of all accomplishments."

"How?" gasped Mary Augusta, with all her eager soul in her face.

"Well, I suppose we'd better talk about that when it isn't Sunday; still, I was only going to say that Carter & Mudgett, the grocers down at Freeport, have asked me to supply them with all their jellies and preserves." Mrs. Tackaberry suddenly began to talk of the beauty of the day as some people passed them. "It is a little of a secret, of course," she explained a moment later. "Carter & Mudgett don't want everybody's jellies and preserves, and they had heard of my sweet pickles. You have heard of my sweet pickles?"

"Oh yes," said Mary Augusta, as if she had been asked if she ever had heard of the Declaration of Independence.

In fact, Mrs. Tackaberry's sweet pickles were like the old woman's fabulous root beer, the recipe for which had once served as a king's ransom. They were "mixed" pickles. Critical tasting and experimenting had failed to enable any housekeeper successfully to imitate them.

"They want those, too. But I never shall make any more. I'm growing old, and since my trouble"—her full, florid face worked piteously—"I haven't been the same woman."

Mary Augusta vaguely remembered having heard of the trouble; it had happened when she was quite a little girl; it must have been six or seven years before. Her eyes filled with sympathetic tears, even while her heart thrilled with longing to hear more of this wonderful business prospect—this unthought of possibility. Mrs. Tackaberry drew her toward her tenderly.

"How old are you, dear?" she asked.

"I shall be fifteen next week," answered Mary Augusta, breathlessly.

"I'm going to give you my recipe for sweet pickles, and I'm going to get you the chance to make jellies and preserves for Carter & Mudgett. And all I'll ask you to do for me in return is a little mite of a thing—just a little mite of a thing that won't cost you anything."

Mary Augusta's sensitive face flushed and paled. Her chin was quivering.

"I can't think of anything that I wouldn't do!" she answered, fervently.

She ran back "across lots"; she had unconsciously gone beyond Miss Tapley's house in her eager interest in what Mrs. Tackaberry was saying. Deacon Greer's carriage had gone around through the "willow road"—having old

Mrs. Gerry, who lived there, as a passenger—but it was as well to hurry, for if she arrived later than Miss Roxally it might be necessary to explain how she had been detained.

In her effort to take the shortest possible cut across the field, she found herself among flags and rushes and over shoes in water, and was obliged to retrace her steps and skirt the stone wall.

She was running rapidly, her mind in a delightful ferment of sweet pickles and possible independence, when there suddenly appeared on the other side of the stone wall the startling spectacle of a manacled hand—a boy's hand, slender and sunburned. The iron upon the wrist was pounded with great force upon a stone; then it was wrenched about upon a sharp projection of rock. The hand was torn and bleeding with many of these poundings and wrenchings.

Mary Augusta did not cry out, simply because she was not of the crying-out kind. She ran on a little way and then she stood and looked back, with a wildly beating heart.

The boy still lay in ambush on the other side of the wall.

A boy, like Elnathan, and with a handcuff on his wrist! He must have been bad, but Mary Augusta yearned to help him. By the way of Elnathan all boys were her brothers.

I'M A BOY'S SISTER

CHAPTER IV

I'M A BOY'S SISTER

MARY AUGUSTA, gazing at the handcuffed boy, stood irresolute for a moment and then stole softly back to the stone wall. But she did not go softly enough; the movement of the scrubby birches that lined the wall on the other side showed that the boy had taken alarm and was scurrying away on his hands and knees.

"You needn't run. I'm a boy's sister," Mary Augusta called; but the words faltered on her tongue. She was afraid of a boy with a handcuff; workers of iniquity were almost unknown to peaceful Joppa.

She turned her steps homeward and had set forth the Sunday dinner of cold baked beans and huckleberry pie when Miss Roxally came in.

It was only after her second piece of huckleberry pie, however, that she suddenly looked up at Mary Augusta and asked:

"What were the girls talking about when you walked home with them this noon?"

Mary Augusta faltered, for truth was as the breath of her nostrils.

"Eliza Patey's stepmother won't let her make a butter image to send to the fair," she said, remembering a chance remark. "The girls think it's mean."

"Ornament is ornament, and victuals are victuals," said Miss Roxally, sententiously. "I'm glad Hannah Patey has got some sense. 'Twas a real improving discourse this morning, wasn't it? You ought to have heard old Mrs. Gerry try to find out about my rug, while we were comin' home! Lucinda Tackaberry asked her to do it, I haven't any doubt; but there'll be one thing Lucinda Tackaberry can't find out, if there never was but one, and that's the pattern of my fair rug."

At night Miss Roxally decided that she would not go to the evening service; she said she felt a little as if a numb spell might be coming on, and she wasn't going to run any risks about finishing that rug. Mary Augusta could go with the girls.

Mary Augusta went with the girls, but she came home with Mrs. Tackaberry. It was down in the hollow, just before they came to Miss Roxally's garden fence, that Mrs. Tackaberry told Mary Augusta what the little thing was that she expected her to do in return for the great business opportunity she had offered her. She had brought the recipe for sweet pickles, carefully folded in her hymn-book; she spoke of it with almost tearful solemnity, saying that it had been in her family for generations and had never been sold or given away, and that her grandmother Forristall had always prophesied there would be a fortune in it for somebody.

It was such a little thing she wanted Mary Augusta to do that it seemed foolish to ask it; Miss Roxally couldn't have any real objection, but Miss Roxally was old-maidish, as everybody knows, and she had chosen to make a great mystery about her rug. Mrs. Tackaberry wanted to see the rug.

"I won't ask *you* to let me see it!" cried Mrs. Tackaberry, when Mary Augusta's silence had testified more strongly than words to her dislike of the proposed bargain. "It needn't be your doings at all! I know the rug is in the wood-shed chamber, and I know there's a flight of stairs leading up there from the barn. You can manage to leave the barn door open and the wood-shed chamber unlocked; then you needn't know anything about what happens!

"I know it's childish in me to want to see it," went on the wheedler, "but it don't seem as if I could stand it to have her beat me; and I can't feel satisfied to go on with my rug while I am not sure but she's got a handsomer one. It won't do a mite of harm; I wouldn't copy it nor tell anybody for the world. I'm going to give you the recipe, just as if 'twas something great that I was after. It'll help you to that chance with Carter & Mudgett, and if you ain't the one, after all, that makes the family fortunes, I'll miss my guess!"

A moment of miserable hesitation, in which a long elm branch seemed to be writing in the road like the finger of destiny, then Mary Augusta's hand closed over the folded paper.

The next day the rug grew apace. With care and catnip tea Miss Roxally had warded off the "numb spell." Mary Augusta worked with tireless energy. Miss Roxally declared that she was thoroughly satisfied with the change she had made in the middle from the orig-

Mary Augusta's Price.

"MARY AUGUSTA WORKED WITH TIRELESS ENERGY."

inal pattern, which was only "little whirligigs that didn't seem to mean anything"—if it was a real Persian prayer-rug of which a summer visitor had taken the pattern for her. The middle, which Miss Roxally had composed, or rather had copied, with slight variations, from a pattern she had bought, was an owl of brilliant purple perched upon a green bough adorned with bright red cherries.

Miss Roxally felt that an owl upon a rug was a daring innovation. She was alive to the difficulty of securing a truly owl-like expression of feature in rags: but she believed that she and Mary Augusta together might achieve it.

After sleepless nights of conflict, and fruitless searchings in her "piece room" in the attic for just the right shade of purple, she had resolved to sacrifice her second best cashmere dress; but this was a secret not as yet revealed.

Miss Roxally laid her head on the pillow on that Monday night with bright hopes for the success of her rug, and congratulating herself that she had engaged Mary Augusta, who was capable and close-mouthed. Meanwhile Mary Augusta was slipping softly out through the long corridor to the wood-shed chamber, to unfasten the door at the head of the stairs that led to the barn.

Just after dark she had stolen out and unlocked the barn door, and now Miss Roxally's cherished secret lay open to the woman who was coming with a dark lantern, like a burglar, across the marshy field.

Mary Augusta lay awake long that

night, heavy with guilt. She tried to convince herself that what she had done was a little thing, as Mrs. Tackaberry said, a trifle that could harm no one; she remembered that Elnathan was always saying that she took things too hard.

She coaxed her fancy to conjure up a future of brilliant business success. The great high-bush blueberries and blackberries, with which Dumpling Hill was covered, stood in shining jars upon her shelves; she would furnish a market for the crab-apples and the damson plums for which the region about Joppa was noted; other firms besides Carter & Mudgett—city firms—should be her customers. Stay! there should be a canning establishment like the one at the Port; like it, only larger.

She would admit Elnathan to partnership; perhaps he would like it as well as going to college. The firm should be E. & M. A. Wing. She felt a thrill of generosity in the decision that Elnathan's name should appear first. It really did something toward soothing the underlying, miserable sense of guilt which would not let itself be forgotten.

Then she slept and dreamed, and things began to grow fantastic about the canning factory. The jars of Dumpling Hill blackberries had handcuffs about their necks; Mrs. Tackaberry had turned into a sweet pickle of a variety which no one could name; it seemed to Mary Augusta that the owl on Miss Roxally's rug might know the name, but he had hung himself with a long purple rag. Meanwhile the sweet pickle that had been

Mrs. Tackaberry bubbled and steamed in a great kettle, and then it smoked, and the smoke was suffocating.

MRS. TACKABERRY IS UPSET

CHAPTER V

MRS. TACKABERRY IS UPSET

MARY AUGUSTA found herself sitting upright in bed, crying out that she was choking—and that was no dream. The room was filled with smoke, and the cold, clear moonlight outside was mingled with a redder gleam. There was a noise of hurrying feet and a chorus of cries of "Fire!" Mary Augusta dressed herself, feeling scarcely sure that she was not dreaming. As she opened her door a heavy burden was being borne along the hall—the great rug in its frame from the wood-shed chamber.

"No, I won't have it taken outdoors!"

Miss Roxally's voice cried, shrilly. "I'd rather risk its being burnt up than to have Lucinda Tackaberry find out what the pattern is!"

Valuables were being hastily carried out of the house, but the rug was left in the spare chamber. The barn was burning; it was likely that the wood-shed would go, also. But the wind was carrying the flames away from the house. There were strong hopes of saving it. Mary Augusta, listening horror-stricken at the head of the stairs, heard them say so.

People were speculating about the origin of the fire. It had caught in the barn; that, they said, was evident. The barn door was found unlocked, though Miss Roxally was sure she had locked it with her own hands.

Some tramp had set the fire, no doubt; he might have perished in the flames.

Mary Augusta laughed hysterically, all alone in the darkness. A tramp! She knew well enough that it was Mrs. Tackaberry who set the fire. Probably she had put her lantern down upon the hay-loft while she opened the door; a wisp of hay had overhung the chimney of the lantern.

Mrs. Tackaberry was heavy and clumsy, and she would have been too much perturbed in mind to stop the spread of the flame.

With this picture before her, Mary Augusta flew about, trying to save things. She carried out Fluff, the old yellow cat, and her two kittens, three times, and each time Fluff returned to the hall closet with the kittens in her mouth.

Miss Roxally ran wildly about with her most precious possessions and her most worthless, huddled promiscuously into a huge clothes-basket, and loudly bewailed that she had allowed her insurance to expire the day before. If they did save the house, the barn and the carriage-house would be a total loss—a loss of not less than a thousand dollars.

A thousand dollars! Mary Augusta felt as if an icy hand had clutched her heart when she heard that. In some way she must pay it. It did not occur to her that any other course would be possible—unless perhaps Mrs. Tackaberry might share; but Mary Augusta did not think that would be like Mrs. Tackaberry. No, her own life was mortgaged to Miss Roxally for a thousand dollars.

It may be thought strange that Mary Augusta, who had yielded so easily to the temptation to do a dishonorable thing, should have on this point so high and inflexible a standard of morality; but the other had been an intangible wrong done to Miss Roxally, at worst but a blow to her vanity; while to Mary Augusta's practical mind this tangible material injury assumed a very different aspect.

All her high hopes of independence, of making the fortune of her family, of being acknowledged the "smart" one of the family, had vanished in the smoke of Miss Roxally's barn!

To earn and save a thousand dollars seemed impossible, but if one must! In time, even if it were not until one's hair was gray, it could be done.

She shrank from the thought of the fruit-canning and preserving that had seemed so delightful; but that was the only possible way to pay the debt. The sweet pickles she would never make; that recipe gave her a Judas-like feeling; it seemed peculiarly her price. While the embers of the barn still smoldered she tore the paper into minute bits and scattered them to the four winds. Why had she read that hateful recipe so many times? It seemed indelibly stamped upon her memory. Perhaps that was a part of her punishment!

When the firemen and the kindly neighbors, who had made Miss Roxally's trouble their own, had left the ruins, and Miss Roxally had retired, to repair by a little rest the ravages of her sleepless night, Mary Augusta walked about the smoldering heap that had been the barn, seeking some indication of the origin of the fire. The wild waving of a blue gingham apron at the edge of the field attracted her attention. It was Mrs. Tackaberry, and Mary Augusta reluctantly obeyed the summons.

Mrs. Tackaberry looked old and worn in the morning light, and her genial double chin hung flabby and dejected. "You don't expect that I set the barn afire, do you?" she said in a whisper.

"Yes'm, I think you did set the barn on fire," answered Mary Augusta, sadly, but with uncompromising candor.

"I remember setting my lantern down there on the loft, 'mongst the hay," said Mrs. Tackaberry, reflectively. "But la!

where else could I have set it?" she added, with the air of ridding herself of all responsibility in the matter.

Mary Augusta's heart sank. It was evident, she thought, that Mrs. Tackaberry would never feel it incumbent upon her to pay any part of the thousand dollars. She had not expected that she would, and yet the burden seemed to fall afresh and to be heavier than ever.

"I'm real upset," pursued Mrs. Tackaberry, plaintively. "'Twas seeing that rug that did it, in the first place; 'twas full handsomer than what I thought it would be. It's a real uncommon pattern, and having such a sight of handsome pieces gives her the start of everybody else.

"They do say she's got a piece of every silk dress that was made in Joppa for twenty-five years and a good many that was made in Freeport.

"I've made up my mind that I sha'n't try to send a rug to the fair," she went on. "I couldn't stand it to get beaten by that mean, grudging Roxally Tapley. I may get up spunk enough to make a crazy-quilt, and I may not. I guess maybe father and I will go down to Norway to my sister's for a little vacation; he's kind of miserable, poor father is. It isn't any use for those that have had children and trouble to stand up against Roxally Tapley, that never had any own folks and has never in this living world thought of anybody but Roxally Tapley."

A faint remonstrance arose to Mary Augusta's lips; faint, for she was sore with Miss Roxally's little stabs, but nevertheless, she thought she had seen signs of a leaven of kindness in Miss Roxally's heart.

"About that—that sweet pickle."

Mrs. Tackaberry turned a searching gaze upon Mary Augusta's face, which had a pallor that made all its yellow freckles more distinct. Mrs. Tackaberry thought to herself, "I most wish I hadn't done it; she's so terrible homely and kind of dull."

"I'll write to Carter & Mudgett and recommend you before I go," she resumed, aloud. "And about that sweet pickle—"

"I don't think I shall ever make any of that," said Mary Augusta.

"Well, perhaps you might not have real good luck with it," said Mrs. Tackaberry, with an accent of relief. "I don't know as anybody could, outside of our family. And seeing I sha'n't make any rug, and your just leaving the door open for me wasn't any use, why, I guess we're square.

"About the barn's being burnt," she looked with a half-puzzled lack of comprehension at Mary Augusta's wan face, over which an indescribable, pitiful change seemed to have come, "why, the barn's being burnt was only an accident," she said, comfortably.

MARY AUGUSTA IN THE PIECE-ROOM

CHAPTER VI

MARY AUGUSTA IN THE PIECE-ROOM

MISS ROXALLY had from her window espied Mary Augusta when she obeyed the beckoning of the blue gingham apron, and as soon as the girl entered the house she called to her, in a tone of asperity, that she should like to know what Lucinda Tackaberry wanted.

Mary Augusta explained, with a painful sense of guilt at the necessary reservations, that Mrs. Tackaberry had said she and father were going to her sister's at Norway for a little visit and that she had decided not to make a rug for the fair.

Miss Roxally had come out of her room to meet Mary Augusta as she came upstairs, and she dropped down, suddenly, upon the topmost stair and drew a long breath.

"There wasn't anybody that I was afraid of except Lucinda Tackaberry," she said, "and it is kind of a relief. I expect I'm getting too old for such struggles and conflicts, and I'm one that likes to have friendly feelings with my neighbors, even when they ain't just what they ought to be. Father Tackaberry, that's kind of feeble anyway, he worked like a Trojan putting out that fire, and if she's been brought to a better mind—"

"She thinks she may have spunk enough for a crazy-quilt," said Mary Augusta, striving to bear faithful witness.

"'Land! I'd just as lief she would make one of those things, if she wants to,'' said Miss Roxally, contemptuously. ''Come to think of it, I believe I'll send her over some silk pieces. I've got more than I could ever use, if I should live to be a hundred. If you don't feel too beat out, I'll let you go right up to the attic and pick her out a lot of handsome ones.''

It was a relief to Mary Augusta to go up to the ''piece-room'' and look over the great heaps of what some people might have thought only rags, but which, to Mary Augusta's and to many older feminine eyes, had a delightful fascination.

It was dark in the small, unfinished room, but she found with surprise that the two windows were open; still the room seemed stifling from the smoke of the fire, and she hurriedly threw open the blinds.

As she turned away from the window, one of the heaps of rags stirred, and while her heart stood still with fear a voice came from it.

"You can holler out and let them catch me if you want to, but you said you were a boy's sister!" it said.

It was a long, loose-jointed, roughly-clad boy who slowly extricated himself from the brilliant heap of pieces. Under his shock of tangled curly hair a pair of brown eyes with a vaguely familiar expression looked at Mary Augusta. She saw with relief that the iron was gone from the boy's wrist.

"Yes, I got it off," he said, with a nod of satisfaction, as he followed her gaze with his eyes. "It didn't belong there; you needn't think it did."

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Mary Augusta, fervently. She did not doubt the boy's word; it was the home opinion that it was easy to impose upon Mary Augusta.

"They're after me for breaking into Quimby's store at Freeport. 'Twas another fellow; he came off the ship with me, and they nabbed me instead. I broke away, but they're after me. And I came back to begin all over again! I ran away to sea when I was a youngster." The boy hung his head and kicked Miss Roxally's precious pieces in an embarrassed way. "I wanted things livelier than they were at home; a fellow doesn't know much when he's young!" The philosopher of seventeen shook his head sadly. "I've been rough and wild, you know, but never bad like that—like stealing; but for all that it's hard to get a chance to begin over again!"

"Oh, it is hard!" cried Mary Augusta, heavy with a sense of her own difficulties, as well as with sympathy.

"If I didn't have to go away to sea again," the boy continued, dejectedly, "I can get away, I think, now I've got that thing off my wrist." He looked cautiously out of the windows. "I haven't dared to try, the fire brought so many folks 'round. That woman with the lantern must have set the fire. Who was she?"

Mary Augusta trembled from head to foot as he looked at her with breathless eagerness.

Mary Augusta's Price.

"'YOU SAID YOU WERE A BOY'S SISTER.'"

"Did you have a light?" she demanded, ignoring his question.

"Not so much as a match," he answered, with a convincing readiness. "I just got the handcuff off last night; there wasn't time to get away, and by good luck I found that barn door open. I was up on the loft and I was asleep. I guess it was the light that waked me. I thought the officers were after me, being waked so suddenly, you see. I slipped through the door at the head of the stairs, right into a chamber over the wood-shed. I groped my way through in the dark and found a chance to hide up here. Who was the woman with a lantern? Her hair was gray." His voice faltered, and as she looked at him a sudden light dawned upon Mary Augusta.

"It was Mrs. Tackaberry," she said,

and the boy's face melted and broke like a frosty pool in the sun. But he turned it toward the window, away from Mary Augusta.

"I'll never go home to my mother and father until I've begun all over again," he said.

Mary Augusta reflected for a moment.

"Miss Tapley's brother at Argyle wants a boy on his farm and in his store," she said. "He wrote to her about one. You wait and I'll see about it."

The boy caught her by the arm as she opened the door.

"I'm not afraid to trust *you,*" he said; "but you—you'll be careful not to let *them* know anything about it." He pointed toward the Tackaberry house, and Mary Augusta nodded sagely in response, her eyes full of tears.

She went down without the pieces, and tried to break the news gently to Miss Roxally that there was a boy in the "piece-room." But finesse was far from being Mary Augusta's forte, and she had difficulty in persuading Miss Roxally not to lock the door and put her head out of the window and scream for the sheriff.

"I think it's Lucius Tackaberry, who ran away to sea when he was eleven," said Mary Augusta, and then Miss Roxally said "Sh! Sh!" as if it were Mary Augusta who had wanted to make an outcry, and sat down and drew a long breath.

"It isn't as if I didn't know Lucinda Tackaberry and that the leopard don't change his spots," she said, meditatively; "but she and Father Tackaberry were bound up in that boy, and I don't know but it would kill them to have him come home so. Besides, I don't expect he did steal; that wouldn't be apt to run in the Tackaberry blood. If I like the looks of him, maybe I'll send him down to Argyle to Isaiah. Isaiah is the kind that likes to help a boy to a new start."

It was only after she had interviewed the boy at great length, and believing his story, had sent him off to Isaiah at Argyle, with the promptness and energy which were her characteristics, that Miss Roxally turned to Mary Augusta and said abruptly:

"I don't see how that wood-shed chamber door came to be unfastened. It doesn't seem as if I could have done that."

But she did not ask Mary Augusta whether she had unfastened the door, and to Mary Augusta's surprise, she did not suggest a probability that the boy had set fire to the barn.

Miss Roxally said she thought she shouldn't rebuild her barn at once; she had other losses and she felt too poor; she thought too much of the heifer she was bringing up to sell it, but she would get Ephraim Hapgood to raise it for her.

THE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH

CHAPTER VII

THE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH

MARY AUGUSTA carried the pieces over to Mrs. Tackaberry that same afternoon, after the boy had gone safely off to Argyle. Mrs. Tackaberry, on seeing the pieces, said, "Well, I never did!"

She and Mary Augusta sat on the hair-cloth sofa in the sitting-room and looked over the rags together. They knew the pieces of wedding dresses, and of the dress that Maria Scott wore when she appeared as a public reader, and of the one that the new minister's wife "came out bride" in—the little yellow-haired woman who didn't live a year.

Then Mrs. Tackaberry discovered a

piece of the blue silk that she had when Lucius was a baby; she knew it by the little frosted star upon it; and of the plum color that she had when she went to Norway to her sister's wedding, when Lucius was just five years old, and she cried over both of them; and she said that anybody ought to forgive Roxally Tapley, that never knew the comfort of children, if she wasn't just what she ought to be, and it was foolish to let sofa pillows and rugs come between old neighbors, and that Mary Augusta might tell her that she was really obliged to her.

But she said nothing about the barn until as Mary Augusta reached the gate, she called after her, tremulously:

"Anybody might set a barn afire in the night—a tramp with a pipe or anybody, couldn't they?" she said.

But Mary Augusta walked on, uncompromisingly silent.

She worked tirelessly at the rug and at Miss Roxally's housekeeping. Miss Roxally said she never had such help as Mary Augusta, but she wasn't as good company as she expected she would be.

Mary Augusta went home with a crisp ten-dollar bill when the rug was finished. Her family advised her how to spend it. Eldora thought she should buy a handsome hat; she said with sisterly frankness that when one wasn't either pretty or stylish a hat went a great way.

Miranda thought she ought to help pay for a new piano cover and a handsome lamp-shade for the parlor; while their mother said that if they were not going to sell the wood on the "heater-piece," Mary Augusta would have to buy her winter cloak with that money.

Elnathan gave his advice privately; he was developing business ideas, and it was his opinion that there was money in Pekin ducks. Bob Pringle had some to sell, and considering that there were a brook and a pool in their meadow—

But Mary Augusta walked to Freeport and deposited her ten dollars in the savings bank. It was on the same day that she went to the Freeport canning factory to see about getting work. Alberta Tree worked there and got ten dollars a week. The letter which Mary Augusta had received from Carter & Mudgett had not been very satisfactory; she thought they seemed to doubt the ability of a sixteen-year-old girl. They said they had a fine class of custom and their goods must be of the very highest grade, and they had already engaged most of their fall stock, but if she cared to send them some samples, and these proved satisfactory, they might be able to give her a small order.

She was offered a situation in the factory at eight dollars a week. They took no account of her modestly claimed skill at canning and preserving; they had older and more experienced people for that.

Her mother wept when Mary Augusta asked for her consent; it was so different from writing poetry, like Eunice Phillips! Eldora said she had always known that Mary Augusta would never be anything but "a scrub," but it did seem too bad for one of *them.* Even Elnathan shook his head and didn't know what to make of Mary Augusta. For she could not take even Elnathan into her confidence.

She worked evenings and filled the small order that Carter & Mudgett gave her. Elnathan picked the berries and fruit and was very kind and helpful, but he felt that this gave him an especial right to advise about the investment of her money, and that was embarrassing.

She wore her old cloak and was very shabby, and it gradually came to be understood that she should keep out of the way when there was company. Elnathan tried to be sympathetic, and brought home from the library a large volume on "The Accumulation of Wealth," which he proposed that they should read together. But the neighbors shook their heads and thought it lamentable that a young girl should become so miserly, and Eldora and Miranda were deeply mortified.

Miss Roxally's rug took the prize at the fair. Everyone said it was the handsomest rug that had ever been seen there. Miss Roxally sent Mary Augusta a ticket to the fair, but she did not go, because if she did she would lose her day's wages. The firm had discovered, by this time, that her skill at preserving was of value and they had raised her wages to ten dollars a week.

L. of C.

MARY AUGUSTA IN BUSINESS

7—*Mary Augusta's Price.*

CHAPTER VIII

MARY AUGUSTA IN BUSINESS

IN in the spring Mrs. Wing sold the wood on the "heater-piece," and Mary Augusta's share of the money was seventy-five dollars. It was just at that time that a letter came from Carter & Mudgett, saying that her goods had given such satisfaction that they would like to order their entire stock of her this year.

Elnathan wagged his head sagely and said that was business. Some capital was needed; an addition would have to be built to the back kitchen and they ought to have a horse and wagon. Of course his seventy-five dollars wouldn't go far, and he had meant to use it toward his college expenses, but he was willing to put it with hers, to help out.

It would be safe to invest money in the business. Mary Augusta sat on the back kitchen table with Elnathan and proved it by figures. Elnathan never had to help her now; she had studied in the long winter evenings as energetically as she worked. Elnathan said it was wonderful to see how her wits had sharpened.

When the figures had shown her what might be, she gave way and burst into tears. To Elnathan's bewilderment and distress she would only say she couldn't! she couldn't! the money wasn't hers.

She had two hundred and seventy-five dollars—a small fortune, it seemed to Elnathan; she had earned the two hundred by hard work and painful self-denial, and it wasn't hers!

She took a half-holiday and went over to the Corner, the next day. She had two errands. A boy who worked at the factory knew who had broken into Quimby's store; he could prove that Lucius Tackaberry was innocent. Mary Augusta wished to tell Miss Roxally of that, and if she could gain Mrs. Tackaberry's consent, she wished to confess everything to Miss Roxally, and give her the two hundred and seventy-five dollars as the first instalment of what she owed.

There was such a temptation to keep the money, now! Not only were there such business prospects, but there had never been so much need that she should be "smart," for there had been some wire-pulling among the committee, and

Eldora had lost her school, and Signor Scherzolari had come up from Freeport and taken away almost all of Miranda's music pupils.

Miss Roxally wept enough to tarnish all her pins when Mary Augusta told her about the boy who could prove Lucius Tackaberry's innocence. She said he had been such a good boy that Isaiah had thanked her many times for sending him to him, and in the months which she had spent in Argyle she had grown really fond of him, and let Lucinda Tackaberry be what she would, she was glad for her, and Mary Augusta ought to go right over and tell her.

It was a thing to warm one's heart, it was a thing to make one realize the blessedness of life, to tell Mrs. Tackaberry and Father Tackaberry about their boy who had been lost and was found. Mrs. Tackaberry followed Mary Augusta to the gate, detained her by a fat clasp upon her arm — which thrilled Mary Augusta with a painful memory—and burst into a fresh flood of tears.

"Seeing what Roxally Tapley has done for my boy, I can't help thinking about burning her barn," she said.

Mary Augusta felt the stirring of hope; she had tried to ask her if she might tell Miss Roxally about it, but the theme seemed to jar too painfully upon the general joy.

"Father knows all about the company that she was insured in," continued Mrs. Tackaberry, "and he says if she had stuck to it she could have made them pay her. There was some reason why she was entitled to a day of grace."

"I am going to pay it, anyway; I opened the door," said Mary Augusta. "I've been saving up and I have two hundred and seventy-five dollars of the thousand."

"Why! why! I heard about your saving! Is that what you've been doing it for? And I—I never thought anything about it until I knew she helped my boy. Why, you poor little creature! Tell Miss Roxally? Why—why, I don't know as I care for anything, now, I'm so happy! And 'twasn't anything—just to see her rug; she ought to be flattered. And it might have been a tramp that burned the barn, if I did set the lantern down."

But Mary Augusta had gone with the coveted permission to tell. Mrs. Tackaberry's easy view of things confused and pained her.

Miss Roxally listened to her story with amazement, changing slowly to a glow of admiration in her face.

"It was splendid of you!" she cried. "I wouldn't have believed you would let Lucinda Tackaberry in to see my rug, you seemed so straightforward," she added. "But there! I don't care a mite about that now, not a mite. How we do get worked up over little things. But to think you've toiled and struggled like that to pay for the barn when I set it on fire myself!"

"You—you!" cried Mary Augusta.

"Yes, me. I knew it right away, and that was the reason I didn't make the fuss I might have made about the insurance. I didn't tell, because I've always been real sensitive about walking in my sleep. I dreamed that night that Buttercup, the heifer, was choking with a turnip. When I woke up I was in her stall in the barn.

"I hurried right away, for I was barefooted and shivering, and I was afraid I should have a numb spell. When I got back to my room I thought about fire, for I'd picked the kerosene lamp up from right amongst the hay, where I'd set it in my sleep. But 'twas most morning and I thought I'd risk it without going back. When the alarm of fire woke me I thought I'd done it; when they said the fire must have started right by that stall, then I knew."

Mary Augusta's face, with its high, lumpy forehead and its long, peaked chin, was radiant with joy. She opened her heart and told Miss Roxally something about the beautiful business prospects, and that she didn't think she should ever have to be taken care of, although she wasn't "smart" like the others.

And Miss Roxally's sympathy was so deep that not one pin-prick was mingled with its expression.

"If ever you want any help, getting started or getting along, you'll know where to come for it!" she said heartily.

When Mary Augusta left Miss Roxally's house there was Mrs. Tackaberry's blue gingham apron waving again on the edge of the field.

Mary Augusta obeyed the summons more reluctantly than the first time. Mrs. Tackaberry would always jar upon her.

It was not about the barn that Mrs. Tackaberry wished to speak; she had apparently forgotten all about that. But she held out a folded paper and she hid her face in her blue gingham apron, tearfully.

"I declare I'm ashamed to tell you," she said; "but I—didn't give you the right recipe for sweet pickles! It had been in our family so long and Grandma Forristall prophesied that it was worth a fortune, and I couldn't bring myself to give it away."

Mary Augusta shrank from it a little, even now; she could not help remembering that it was the thing for which she had sold herself.

"But it's just right now—" Mrs. Tackaberry saw the shrinking and looked at Mary Augusta in bewilderment. "If you'll take it—"

"Yes'm, I'll take it," said Mary Augusta, firmly. "It will be very useful in my business."

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